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Marcellus Shale gas development fueling Bradford County boom

By Andrew Maykuth

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TOWANDA, Pa. - Not so long ago, this town was just the seat of Bradford County. Now, it lies at the epicenter of natural gas development in the Marcellus Shale region.

It used to be a sleepy little place on the Susquehanna River. Now, it's a boom town.

Help-wanted signs plead for waitresses, mechanics, truck drivers. Once-empty storefronts are now occupied in this hilly borough, population 3,000.

Towanda has morning and midday rush hours, thanks to the columns of trucks bearing water, sand, and drill pipe. A banner hangs outside First Liberty Bank & Trust: "Gas Rights? We can help."

"People used to call Towanda a ghost town," said Shannon Clark, a Borough Council member and real estate agent. "No more."

Across the county, unemployment is down. But crime, mostly alcohol-related, is up, said Sheriff Clinton Walters. There was even a shooting at a Towanda tavern a few months back.

"We didn't have shootings in this area unless it's family members," said Jim Meehan, regional housing coordinator for Futures Community Support Services.

So many title researchers have descended on the Bradford County Courthouse to examine deeds for gas leases that the county extended office hours and installed tables in the hallways to accommodate the crowds. The rotunda looks like a college library during finals.

"Hey, this was a dead area, so the excitement is mostly good," said Shirley Rockefeller, the county's register and recorder of deeds. Her office has even recorded several marriages of local women to Gulf Coast roughnecks, she said.

According to the state Department of Environmental Protection, 355 of the 1,368 Marcellus wells drilled in Pennsylvania this year were drilled in this rural county on the New York border. Bradford County also leads the state in gas production.

Suddenly, in an agricultural region of 62,000 people that had been suffering long-term population decline, decent housing is in short supply.

So many outsiders have flooded in that rents have doubled. Despite the expansion of mobile-home and RV parks, longtime tenants are priced out of the market.

Gas operators have booked most of the motel rooms here and across the border in New York, where the state has a temporary ban on drilling so it can study the controversial extraction process called hydraulic fracturing.

Even modest lodgings are pricey, and social-service agencies that relied on motels for emergency shelter are out of luck.

"We had to turn homeless people away because there wasn't any room," said Meehan, who coordinates low-income housing in several northern counties.

He was pleased when Chesapeake Energy Corp., the largest leaseholder in Bradford County, opened a 276-bed dormitory and training complex last month in Athens Township. Chesapeake previously leased virtually every room in five motels.

"This will take some of the pressure off the local housing market," said Brian Grove, Chesapeake's senior director of corporate development.

The \$7 million Chesapeake facility is the latest proof the boom in natural gas is here for the long haul. Industry officials project that so much natural gas is contained in the mile-deep Marcellus Shale that intense drilling activity will be sustained for at least a decade.

Comprising prefabricated metal buildings surrounded by a fence and a guarded entrance, the complex houses roughnecks who work for Chesapeake's subsidiary, Nomac Drilling L.L.C.

Officially, the place is called the Nomac Eastern Training Center and Housing Facility. But folks around here know it as the "Man Camp."

That evokes a *Grapes of Wrath* image that rubs Chesapeake officials the wrong way. "It's not a bunch of guys sitting around on the side of the road cooking a ham hock over a fire," protested Rory Sweeney, a spokesman for the Oklahoma City gas operator.

No, the Man Camp has a 24-hour cafeteria that serves unlimited free food, as well as a free laundry service and indoor and outdoor recreational facilities. The workers who bunk here must adhere to a spartan code: no alcohol, no drugs, no firearms.

"We want them to be well-fed," Grove said. "We want them to be well-rested."

Drillers have an undeserved reputation for rowdiness, Grove insists. Their work schedules leave little time for carousing: Five-man rig crews work 12-hour shifts for two weeks, then get 14 days off, when they return home, mostly out of state.

Two workers are assigned to each room, where Nomac's name is embroidered on the blue linens. Roommates work opposite shifts, so they rarely see each other. Add in travel time to remote drilling rigs, and there are few hours left at the end of each day to eat, sleep, and bathe.

For those who want to exercise, there's a beach-volleyball court, a horseshoe pit, and a softball field. The company provides transportation to nearby Sayre and Athens for shopping.

Still, some of the men said, they wouldn't mind more outings to visit the local sights.

"They've got plenty of food here, but we could use better transportation into town," said Jason Poole, a supervisor from Louisiana who was lifting weights in the gym before heading out for his overnight shift leading a rig crew.

These days, Chesapeake employs about 1,100 people in Pennsylvania, 500 of them state residents. It took over a vacant Ames department store south of Towanda as its regional headquarters, and has 22 drill rigs operating on 1.5 million leased Marcellus acres.

Chesapeake plans to employ more local rig workers as quickly as they can be trained at the new Athens Township complex, Grove said. After the first year, rig workers make about \$60,000.

The housing complex "gives the employees a chance to relax and think about something other than drilling," said Mark Guerking, a manager.

But natural gas is never completely out of mind. Framed photos in each room depict drill-rig scenes. Pennants remind workers to practice safe work habits.

Local businessman Nick Hurley runs the cafeteria at the complex, serving 700 meals a day, including lunches that workers grab on their way out the door. Hurley also provides janitorial and laundry services for the facility.

He can't believe his good fortune. His family owns two grocery stores, but business was suffering before the gas boom hit last year.

"Our backs were against the wall," said Hurley, 36.

He started catering to gas rigs, and the business kept growing. His family's companies now employ 160 people, up from 90 before the boom, including 35 at the Man Camp alone.

"This is wonderful," he said. "We grew up in kind of a repressed area. There is no way we could have built this up without natural gas."

Unemployment is dropping faster here than in any other county in Pennsylvania - the jobless rate was 6.8 percent in October, fourth best in the state, down from 8.1 percent a year ago.

Yet not all is harmonious.

Traffic is getting on the locals' nerves - aggressive driving is a new experience. And overloaded trucks are destroying roads, despite drilling operators' efforts to repair the damage. "Our roads are not built for this," said Mark W. Smith, chairman of the Bradford County Board of Commissioners.

The county also has experienced some environmental problems linked to gas drilling. State officials blamed Chesapeake for tainting at least six residential water wells with methane in Wilmot Township. The company now is supplying the residents with clean water.

Smith said he believed other contamination cases were being quietly resolved by the drillers and landowners.

"It's not all good, and not all bad," he said. "It's already reshaping the social structure. Some people are winners, some are losers."

Marc Davis is one of the winners.

Davis, 56, is a freelance title searcher from Bethlehem. He studies the history of each property back 150 years on behalf of drilling and pipeline companies.

He started working in Towanda more than a year ago, when the courthouse was largely empty. Researchers are so busy now that many earn in excess of \$70,000.

"Land was leasing then for \$2,400 an acre," Davis said. "Now, it's leasing for \$6,500 an acre." About 95 percent of Bradford County is said to be under lease.

Davis could not find an affordable house in Towanda, so he rents in Elmira, N.Y., 33 miles away. Still, he does not mind the commute. "This is the best job I've ever had," he said.

Bradford County is transforming incomprehensibly.

Though about 1 percent of its population is Hispanic, Towanda will get its first Mexican restaurant this week, to serve a growing demand for spicy fare among Gulf Coast workers.

Walters, who became sheriff in February after Chesapeake hired his predecessor, said crime was up. Not dramatically, but measurably.

About 90 gas workers have faced charges, mostly for fighting or driving under the influence. And the county has had to file extradition requests for 12 workers who left the state, he said.


Change is in the air.

"They keep saying there's going to be more," he said. "How much more?"

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